WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW

May 1, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 15:5-10
1 John 4:7-12

"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."
-1John 4:11 (RSV)

The title could have been Famous Last Words because that is what this is: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Last words of the final survivor are important. There is a wonderful Hasidic story about the very wise and very old rabbi on his death bed. His disciples gathered around him waiting for his last words. Hours passed, then days - he said nothing. By now the community was involved. A line stretched from his bedside, out into the hall, down two flights of stairs and out into the street; men waiting quietly, reverently, to hear the wise one's last words. Finally, he gestured to his nearest disciple who leaned over and the old rabbi whispered into his ear: "Life is a river." Down the message went, whispered into each ear and then passed along; "Life is a river," - till it reached the very end of the line, to a young man - who, when he heard, "Life is a river," said, "What's that supposed to mean?" So back up the line the whispered question went, man to man, to the closest disciple who leaned down and said - "What's that supposed to mean?" Again, silence, hours; finally the wise one summoned his strength and gestured to his nearest disciple, and whispered and again, the words were passed along the line, all the way down the stairs, out into the street, to the last man - "So maybe life isn't a river."

I am always moved to read in the paper that the last survivor has died; the last veteran of the war, that famous World War I brigade that gathers each year in France to pass on a bottle of cognac - to be drunk by the last survivor, or member of the championship team. I always find myself wondering if the story has been told enough to live on after the last participant is gone. And so I have always been particularly intrigued by that moment in time - near the end of the First Century. It must have been when time began to run out for the original Christians; when the young people who followed Jesus - in their twenties - were eighty.

By the year 90 A.D., for instance, people who had actually seen Jesus, heard him speak, or touched his hand, were getting along in years. I calculated this week that they represented the same percentage of the population as those of us here this morning who voted for Herbert Hoover. In fact, there weren't many of them left, and those who were, must have been revered and respected and loved very deeply.

One of the oldest and dearest Christian traditions is that the last of them, the last person alive to have walked and talked with Jesus was none other than John, the beloved disciple. He was, we have reason to believe, a young man, perhaps the youngest of the twelve. The tradition is that he wrote the Fourth Gospel and three brief letters near the end of the New Testament. Literary scholars tell us that probably isn't the case. What is true is that the Gospel of John and the three letters of John reflect the same kind of thinking, use a similar vocabulary, and appear to have been written quite late. When exactly and by whom we don't know. But it does appear that they were written in the middle of that time I think is so intriguing and important.

In fact, Robert Browning used it as the setting for a poem, "A Death in the Desert." In the poem, the elderly John is failing quickly and is attended by younger Christians who are facing an increasingly hostile and dangerous world. And the old disciple says -

> "...There is left on earth no one alive who knew
> (consider this)
> Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
> That which was from the first, the Word of life.
> How will it be when none more saith, 'I saw?'"

And so the content of these brief letters, among the last to be written, is very important because there is something of the final words of the last survivor about them. We ought to lean in and listen carefully, that is to say.

At that very point in time, prospects did not look encouraging for the Christian enterprise, or for that matter, for anyone brave or foolish enough to claim Jesus Christ and affirm Christian faith. There were two very significant threats: one external and the other internal. Roman persecution was beginning in earnest. After an initial flurry of activity by the first Christians with missionary success in many cities, Imperial Rome began to sense a threat to its autonomy and authority and decided simply to rid itself of this internal nuisance. And there began more than 200 years of on-again, off-again persecution: some of it simply harassment, some of it incredibly cruel. It didn't work. Persecution never does.

Even more threatening, we now know, was a Greek religious philosophy called Gnosticism - from the Greek word for "knowledge." The Gnostics were intellectuals: they were very reasonable. Christians were glad to make common cause with them. The Gnostics taught that God is truth and that right religion is knowing the truth. That was, and always has been, a very appealing idea. It always has been close to what Judaism and Christianity also affirm about God. God is ultimate truth.

The problem with Gnosticism is that it doesn't say enough. If God is truth, then the pathway to God is understanding, learning, comprehending the secrets. Gnostic religion looks like a secret society in which one progresses through a series of degrees, steps or circles of knowledge, characterized by secret codes, and words and concepts, until one attains the highest degree or inner circle, knowledge of God. There is a sense in which that kind of thinking has always lived comfortably within Christianity. There is a sense in which Christian faith is really a matter of approaching the ultimate truth of God, and that growing in the Lord is a matter of increasing in knowledge and understanding.

The threat from that kind of thinking is that it misses, by a significant margin, the essence of the Gospel. If Christianity had succumbed to that way of thinking it would very shortly have become just another school of Greek philosophy.

The difference, those early Christians realized, the critical difference, is that God is not only ultimate truth. God is redeeming power and reconciling love. So the author uses the language of Gnostocism, images of darkness and light, and adds an intriguing and revolutionary new concept. "God is love." Human experience of God, he proposed, happens not only when we understand ideas about God, but when we love.

That, frankly, was an incredible proposition. It still is. That set Christianity apart from the religions of the ancient world. And it still does. It isn't simply a matter of understanding. It isn't a matter of getting the words right, repeating the sacred formulas or magic mantras of popular religion. It is a matter of love.

This writer, by the way, can be embarrassingly blunt. He wrote: "If a person says he loves God but hates his brother or sister, he's a liar."

That's the bottom line. When you're about to die and you have to get the essence of it down in a sentence or two, this is what it sounds like -

"Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God." [John 4:7-8, NEB]

There is an important point here that Christianity is always tempted to forget. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not simply a new set of ideas about God. It is about God's love which gets itself lived in a Christian community. It's not that the ideas are unimportant. It's just that the essence of it is love, not understanding.

Old heresies never die; they keep showing up in new forms. So the appeal of Gnosticism remains strong. In fact, one of the more intriguing propositions from academia recently is that ancient Gnosticism has found a new home in American Protestant Evangelicalism, where once again the emphasis is on knowing, saying the right words, the appropriate phrases, having a personal experience of salvation that feels good and warm and satisfying... and exclusive. You are a Christian because you know something no one else knows and your task is to get them to know it too. That's Gnosticism in a new wrapping.

The essence of it - elderly John knew and wrote is this: "Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God."

Now that does not mean that Christianity is a philosophy of social betterment only, nor that the Christian enterprise can be reduced to a social service agency, or an Esalen Institute Love-In. In fact, the love we are talking about is not human affection. It is the incarnation, the love of God revealed in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "In this is love," John wrote - "that God sent his son." It is not an amorphous sentiment. It is, for us, strong love that lived and bravely died. It is not sweet sentimentality, but tough love, realistic love, love that knows about evil and sin and death. The love we are talking about is love that participates in the human situation, love that forgives a prostitute, stands for the outcast, and opens its arms to a returning prodigal. This is whole, human, healing love... Without it Christianity is empty... Without it life is empty. Without this love churches are like harsh clanging cymbals, full of noise, or worse yet, like exclusive clubs.

The evangelicals are right to remind us that Christianity is not a theory of social welfare nor an agenda for civic do-gooders. But if we were, should it not be on the side of unconditional love and service? Isn't a greater danger, a religion of empty slogans, and no love? Isn't a greater temptation the Gnostic suggestion that once we have the secret, once we've said - "I know Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior," the matter is closed? If we are going to be guilty of something less than theological perfection, may it be on the side of this bold proposition: "Everyone who loves is a child of God."

It was more than a decade ago I suppose, but the pop song suggested that what the world needs now is love. Probably because some young piano students in our household played it over and over, that song is always near the surface of my mind. But it's also because the further along I progress in my own journey of faith, the more I believe it. "What the world needs now is love" - not Dione Warwick's "love, sweet love," although some of that helps too. What the world needs is God's kind of love... the love that is the essence of our religion... the love you and I have been mandated to express to each other so the world can see what it looks like.

The most "intensely suppressed" fact in the New Testament, someone wrote recently, is the consistent and thorough mandate to believers to love their brothers and sisters in Christ.

The early Christians understood that. It was a matter of life and death for them. They were bound together in small, counter-culture communities that sometimes had to pool all their resources in order to survive. To be a Christian in a city where that could get you thrown to the lions, made you dependent on other Christians in a very real way. The person beside you at prayers might be an informer, or might simply not know how to be discreet. It could cost you your life. So they knew how urgent love for one another was.

They also made a happy discovery that their love for one another and for the world - communicated the Gospel of Christ better than all the sermons they preached.

I would propose that that has not changed either. Our situation, of course, could not be more dramatically different. They were an intimate community of friends. We are a loose knit congregation of mostly strangers, some of whom know one another but by no means all. They depended on one another for security and life itself. Our relationships here do not have to be different from our relationships with neighbors, club members, symphony attendees. And yet - the vital difference remains - we are under mandate to love one another because love is of God.

That doesn't mean, by the way, that we have to like each other. We're called to love each other which, according to our teacher, means accepting and forgiving and serving and supporting.

It means, I think, that the life of the institution conveys a quality of love which is visible to the world. Our world is different from those early Christians. Their's was hostile to Christianity; ours has become indifferent. Their world threw Christians to the lions; ours invites Christians into the halls of power because they pose no threat to the status quo. Their world burned Christians to death; ours watches television and sees an insidious individualism and materialism wrapped in the cloak of exclusive piety - and laughs. What this world needs is love. What this world needs from the church is a vigorous and creative counter-culture: a place where individuals are respected and honored without regard to the classifications and stratifications which the world uses: a place where justice is practiced, where race, sex and worldly conditions do not exclude: a place where love is honored, practiced, expressed and put into action.

It means that the life of this institution reflects that same unconditional love for the world, in ministries with those who have no where else to turn. It means that God's love is expressed not only in sermons from the pulpit, but in the Tutoring Program, and clothing, food and shelter provided to the needy. It means that the Gospel is celebrated and witnessed, not simply verbally, but in an array of programs from CROP Walks to endless solicitations of money for missions.

I believe the world needs the services we provide, but more importantly, the love which the services express.

I believe the culture needs the church - and the love the church represents. What a gorgeous illustration the Russian Orthodox Church has given to the world. For seventy years the church in the Soviet Union has withstood the most determined persecution since the Roman Empire. And this year that church celebrates a thousand-year anniversary, forty million strong, ready once again to fill the air with the sound of its church bells ringing.

We are just one church, of course, but I believe all the commotion about Landmarks designation is evidence that the city needs this church. City people of all persuasions, know intuitively the community's need for

the love this church represents. So please help us tell the city: We're not moving. That rumor is absolutely wrong and without any foundation. We decline the honor of Landmarking, but we love the world: we love this city: and we are not moving from here.

What the world needs now is love. It would appear that our nation and the Soviet Union are realizing that the only thing another generation of nuclear weapons will accomplish is a decrease in our security and an increase in our vulnerability. And so, slowly, but surely, we seem to be moving toward accord.

What the world needs now is love. Aurellio Peccei, founder of the Club of Rome, pointed out that each person in the world sits on the equivalent of ten tons of explosives; that 40% of the world's scientists are working on new military systems; that 150 nation states continue to act on the basis of national self interest only - in the name of patriotism. So the scientists and economists sound more and more like Old Testament prophets.

Frank Feathers, a banker, editor of Business Tomorrow, wrote: "We are all living on a tiny mudball which is spiralling through space. The sooner we accept this simple but soberingly powerful reality, the better will be the future for the mudball and its various inhabitants... we have to view each other as members of the same human family - we are one people... We must recognize the need for an embracing acceptance of the oneness of the race." [Through The Eighties, The World Future Society, p. 430]

What the world needs now is love.

God, I believe, keeps trying to teach us... that love is the only hope for survival; that the only real hope for a human future is some renaissance of caring, accepting, sacrificing love.

God, I believe, keeps showing it to us, little incarnations of hopeful love, in the midst of some of the worst and harshest and cruelest dilemmas we make for ourselves...

Do you know about Janusz Korczak, a Polish Jew, a physician, educator and author of many popular children's books? As the Nazis slowly and relentlessly closed in on the Warsaw Jewish community, Korczak decided to go to work protecting abandoned and orphaned children as long as possible. He established an orphanage in the Ghetto. He taught them, loved them and got them to dream and hope and sing.

And then August 6, 1942... their turn came. They were lined up, all of them, and put into wagons and taken to Treblinka... Old Dr. Korczak, carrying a little girl, holding a little boy's hand, walked with them, and the children sang... [See "Tribune Books," Chicago Tribune, (May 1, 1988), p. 1]

God shows us what the world needs in that Jewish doctor's love... (the one who loves knows God) And God shows us what the love the world needs looks like - in a cross - on which God's only child died.

What the world needs now is love... The way you and I connect with that universal need, instead of wringing our hands and becoming depressed, is to particularize it. What you need now - what I need now - is love. We are created for it.

Our earliest stories tell about people created for life together, living in a paradise of harmony with one another, with nature and with God. That same story suggests that the source of all tragedy is our inability to live together. The harmony is lost. The people leave the garden paradise. And then they start to live and to learn the necessity of loving.

Estrangement and isolation and loneliness don't "feel" right to us, the Bible maintains, because we have been created for love. I think you and I know that. I think we have learned that without love we don't have very much. Those of us who have achieved a modest degree of success in our professions have discovered, along with the satisfaction of success, that without love, it is a hollow accomplishment. In the stress of getting ahead, staying ahead, keeping up... I think everyone of us knows that at a level deep in our souls, we need something more.

It begins here - this vast enterprise of connecting God's love with the need of the world. It begins here - in your soul, where you know your need.

So this day - acknowledge it: and hear both the mandate and the good news. In Jesus Christ - hear God say - "I love you." And hear that old man, the last living witness, pass it on, down across the centuries.

"Beloved, if God so loved us,
we also ought to love one another."